

12-19-2019

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Recommended Citation

Honig, Jonathan A.S. (2019) "Book Review of "The Future of War" by Lawrence Freedman," *International Journal of Nuclear Security*. Vol. 5: No. 1, Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/ijns050108>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/ijns/vol5/iss1/8>

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Book Review

The Future of War

Lawrence Freedman

Public Affairs, New York, NY; 2017, 400 Pages
\$30.30, ISBN-13: 978-1610393058

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The Future of War, by Lawrence Freedman, is a comprehensive work on warfare, its evolution, and its predicted future course which is appropriate for experts and novices alike. Published in 2017, this book contains both historical and contemporary examples of warfare right up to such recent events as the Syrian civil war and the advent of the self-styled Islamic State group. This book is in its first edition and is an excellent marshaling of information on a varied and complex subject.

Freedman is an emeritus professor of war studies at King's College, located in London, U.K. A novel thinker on warfare and strategy, he has been awarded for his writing on the subject. This includes winning the 2009 Lionel Gelber Prize and the Duke of Westminster Medal for Military Literature for his book, *A Choice of Enemies*. Another of Freedman's books, *Strategy*, is included in *Financial Times*' Best Books of 2013. He was elected fellow of the British Academy in 1995, awarded the "Commander of the British Empire" (CBE) in 1996, and was the official historian of the Falklands War in 1997. Further, he was awarded the "Knight Commander of Saint Michael and Saint George" (KCMG) in 2003, and in 2009 he was appointed to serve as a member of the official inquiry into Britain and the 2003 Iraq War.

Freedman has the rare skill of utilizing clear prose that is both extremely informative and well-articulated. To those with some knowledge of the subject, this book contains rare insights and little-known facts that surprise many experts. At the same time, Freedman's book is intellectually accessible to a casual reader with merely a cursory interest in war. It covers over a century-and-a-half of warfare, as well as those individuals who have sought to predict its future throughout its evolution. These include the accounts and direct words of individuals ranging from science fiction writer Isaac Asimov to former President George H.W. Bush, from thriller novelist Tom Clancy to international terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Each of Freedman's examples offer insights into the predictions of some of history and culture's movers and shakers, as they sought to lift the veil on the future of warfare.

The book itself is organized into three different sections, ranging from between six to ten chapters each. The first portion of the book examines the period of warfare occurring from the mid-nineteenth century to the conclusion of the Cold War. Warfare at the beginning of this time-period was idealized, with contained, brief, and decisive battles seen as preferential in its undertaking. The theme of the decisive battle is one revisited by Freedman continuously throughout the book. By the end of this time period, warfare had undergone rapid industrialization and mechanization. Two different World Wars had

occurred, and technology had allowed warfare to be conducted on land, sea, air, and in outer space. In addition, the nuclear age had reared its head. The second portion of the book covers the post-Cold War period after 1990. This section seeks to explain how the West was caught unprepared for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and how predictions about the supposed ongoing nature of the Cold War turned out to be so wrong. The third portion of the book examines the reemergence of great-power conflict, with the rise of China and a resurgent Russia. This portion covers some of the more futuristic aspects and visions of warfare currently on offer. It includes chapters on cyber warfare as well as automated warfare, including the utilization of drones armed with artificial intelligence.

The most unique aspect of Freedman's book is its ability to engage a reader on many different levels. Lacing his book with numerous literary and cinematic references, it is not difficult for a casual reader to find something in common with the book's material (which in turn helps to maintain their interest in a subject which can appear opaque). An example of this would be Freedman's account of H.G. Wells' influence on the development of nuclear weapons. In 1914, Wells published a new fictional novel entitled *The World Set Free*, in which the power of the atom has been harnessed for terrible and destructive ends. In 1933, a Hungarian scientist named Leo Szilard (who had read Wells' book) was ruminating on the novel while crossing a square in London when the insight into how the energy of the atom might be released via a chain reaction came to him. Ironically, 1933 is the same year which Wells had his fictional character in *The World Set Free* discover this very same feat. Many readers of Freedman's book are probably familiar with some of H.G. Wells' other works, such as *The War of the Worlds*, and so the use of this little-known and fascinating tale of the prediction of nuclear warfare is a way of creating lateral connections with readers who are not deeply soaked in the knowledge of warfare but may enjoy science fiction movies and/or books.

Although by and large the book is praiseworthy on many levels it does betray the fact that it is after all a first edition. The formatting of the book is ill-presented, and numerous grammatical errors appear throughout the text. Although Freedman does explain the format of the different sections of the book at the end of its introduction, it is not clear given a cursory glance at the table of contents or by thumbing through the book just how the sections are divided up in terms of content. As the book has a tendency to ramble (albeit in an entertaining fashion), it can be difficult to remember exactly what the common thread between chapters is. Run-on sentences, grammatical errors, and sentence fragments occasionally rear their heads at least once in every chapter, although that is more of an editorial critique.

Overall, *The Future of War* is an excellent read for those who are interested in not only the history of warfare, but also in speculation as to what its next manifestations will be like. For the expert, Freedman's novel deserves a privileged place on their bookshelf as an excellent reference source. For the beginner, this book is a wonderful starting point for the discovery of new and fascinating ideas and subjects in the realm of warfare.